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What does India think of China's 'Belt and Road' Initiative?*

Abstract

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an ambitious regional and global project that it has attempted to sell as a global public good. One country where the Chinese project has met clear, consistent and widespread opposition at both the official level and among strategic analysts, is India. As important a factor that a sometimes reflexive Indian opposition to things Chinese is, there are also big contradictions and wide loopholes in Chinese arguments and justifications for the BRI that deserve to be highlighted. This paper examines Chinese arguments in so far as they relate to India but the weaknesses of these arguments are also germane to other countries that have joined or are seeking to join the BRI.

Keywords: 'one belt, one road', Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese foreign policy, India-China relations, geopolitics, Pakistan, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, grand strategy, diplomacy, Indian foreign policy

The discussion on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, *yidai yilu*) in India within the strategic community comprising of current and former civilian policymakers and military personnel, researchers in think-tanks and university academics has much to offer the rest of the world on how to understand and interpret the Chinese project. The BRI is not seen in India either within the government or outside it as just an economic endeavour but as a comprehensive Chinese strategy of masking its hegemonic foreign policy goals and security policies.

This paper examines in detail the language and arguments presented on the BRI by Chinese analysts vis-à-vis India and Indian responses to these.

Announcing the BRI: Leaving India Out

When CPC General Secretary and Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB, *sichouzhilu jingjidai*) in a speech on 7 September 2013 at the Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China 2013) and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR, *haishang sichouzhilu*) during his visit to Indonesia, the following month (ASEAN-China Centre 2013), the two initiatives caught not just China's neighbours but even the Chinese

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strategic community by surprise.¹ There perhaps, should not have been so much surprise, especially for India.

After all, China had been persisting with the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar regional economic cooperation (BCIM) forum for well over a decade. This initiative was notable for at least two aspects. One, that it involved a Chinese province - Yunnan, in this case - in a lead role and two, that it was a case of opening up China's frontier regions to neighbouring countries as a way of increasing the economic development prospects of the former - of Chinese products finding wider markets on the one hand and learning from best practices and experiences elsewhere, on the other. The BRI can be seen as just a larger, grander version of this project that started as early as 1999.

However, the fact that the BCIM has run into consistent problems over the course of its history should also have been an indication that such initiatives still had much to resolve in terms of how they were structured and sold to prospective partners. Perhaps, Beijing was taken in by its ability to launch the BCIM Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) during the visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to India in May 2013. Opposition from official Indian agencies has been one of the constants of the BCIM project on several grounds including security issues and poor economic development and capacities in its frontier regions (Rana and Uberoi 2012). There was, however, a brief window of willingness to engage with China, nevertheless² and that is how it would seem that the BCIM-EC appears to have come through. But the announcement of the BRI later in 2013 - with its implications for India's neighbourhood - and the apparent subsuming of the BCIM-EC within BRI without explicit consultations with New Delhi, appears once again to have created some amount of renewed opposition within sections of the Indian government to both BCIM-EC and BRI.³

This suggests that the Chinese initiative appears not to have been thought through in its entirety - perhaps a case of 'crossing the river by feeling the stones' (*mozhe shitou guohe*). And while this reality would normally give countries like India greater confidence in trying to engage with the BRI and to achieve mutually beneficial ends, Beijing has consistently appeared to be unwilling to take into account Indian sensitivities or views in the promotion of the BRI. India might have reacted to BRI very differently had Li during his visit to India to launch the BCIM-EC discussed with his hosts the coming launch of the BRI. Instead, Beijing also

¹ Conversations with Chinese scholars in China and India, 2015 and 2016.

² One indication came in the rather positive tenor of official Indian presentations at the 10th BCIM Forum hosted by India at Kolkata in February 2012, which this author participated in (see Mathai 2012).

³ For a summary of India's official position, see the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2016, 2017) and Kasturi (2015).

went on to launch the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passing through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir thereby further stoking Indian anger and disaffection.

Even if Chinese analysts might not agree, Indian analysts tend to view China's actions as a case of deliberately ignoring Indian concerns. There are reasonable grounds for this line of thought. While many Chinese scholars claim that they were themselves caught by surprise by Xi's announcements of the SREB and MSR, the declaration of a new neighbourhood policy in October 2013 at the first work forum (*zuotan*) on diplomacy towards China's periphery (*zhoubian*) (*Xinhua* 2013; also see Heath 2013), suggests that there was some considerable thought put into the formal launching of the BRI. Such forums are not put together lightly or without long preparation in the Chinese system. And if the neighbourhood was discussed, it cannot be the case that such a large and important neighbour as India, including its concerns and sensitivities, was not discussed. So if despite such a discussion, Beijing still went ahead with making BCIM-EC a part of the BRI (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China 2015) and with the launch of the CPEC through territory that is India's sovereign territory under foreign occupation, then it is only natural for New Delhi to conclude that China is not interested in taking on board Indian interests. This being the case, it is also therefore, entirely logical to assume that the BRI while a new way of doing business, different from the Western/American approaches and one which tries to assuage fears of an impending Chinese regional and global hegemony, is nevertheless designed to do just that - to increase China's influence and power at the expense of other countries. The following sub-sections divide China's BRI discourse into five different categories and outline the Indian views and responses in each case.

Semantics and Rhetoric

The Chinese government and strategic community have engaged in semantics as a way of reassuring other countries about the objectives of the BRI. One approach has been to say that the *yidai yilu* is a 'strategy' only *domestically* - of improving China's economic structure and resolving its industrial overcapacity problems - while it was only an 'initiative', *externally*. In this way, perhaps, Chinese academics and policymakers are able to achieve two objectives. First, they are better able to explain the obviously different pace and kind of results that will be achieved through BRI inside China and outside, and second, they can highlight in BRI target nations the 'benign' nature of the exercise. This latter aspect harks back to the time in the 2000s when Chinese policymakers had to quickly change the expression 'peaceful rise' (*heping jueqi*) to 'peaceful development' (*heping fazhan*) over worries that the former expression tended to give off a more aggressive air to China's international activities and role (Zheng and Sow 2005; see also Suettinger 2004). However, as was the case then, so it is now - other countries are unlikely to take Beijing's word for it when it says its intentions are

peaceful or non-hegemonic. China's actions subsequently such as its assertiveness in the South China Sea disputes or more recently its brazen attempt to violate treaty agreements in the Doklam (Dolam) area of Bhutan only bring home this reality in a much stronger way to neighbours like India.

Wordplay, therefore, will hardly suffice for current and potential host nations of China's BRI. The Government of India certainly does not distinguish between 'strategy' and 'initiative' insofar as the BRI is concerned.⁴ That the Chinese are realizing the futility of their arguments is evident in the fact that of late, there are increasingly more Chinese scholars willing to admit that while China's BRI 'had no strategic considerations in the beginning, but later on it did have a few'.⁵

As part of a second approach, Chinese analysts also like to call the BRI, 'open', 'equal' and/or 'inclusive' and to declare that 'any country willing to cooperate can be a partner'. The key seems to be a willingness to cooperate. In other words, the onus seems to be on other countries to want to cooperate, not on China to provide the terms appropriate for such cooperation. China's stress on being 'open', 'equal' and/or 'inclusive' means it treats all countries equally in its invitation to join. Such equality while ostensibly above board is, in practice, discriminatory and weighted against certain countries.

The CPEC is a case in point. The CPEC is not just a single road or a network of roads running through Pakistan but a network of roads, energy and other infrastructure projects throughout the country. This network also involves the existing Karakoram Highway that passes through Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir thus impinging on Indian sovereignty and core interests. In this situation for China to call the BRI 'open', 'equal' or 'inclusive' is disingenuous and clearly makes Indian participation difficult unless the Indians themselves are willing to compromise or set aside their concerns.

In the initial years of the BRI as in the past, Chinese scholars have preferred to or been unable to do anything but evade or elide over the issue of Indian sovereignty over Kashmir. It is only recently that Chinese scholars and officials have been willing to go on the record to state that the CPEC did not imply China was taking sides on the Kashmir issue (Long 2017; Liu 2017). This is a positive development but given the long history of China-Pakistan cooperation targeted against India, such measures will need to be consistent, frequent and accompanied by other actions that prove China is not taking sides - supporting India's membership to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) or sanctioning Pakistan-based terrorists at the United Nations, for example.

⁴ Conversations and discussions in India, 2016.

⁵ Chinese scholar (#1) at a conference in Sichuan, 2016. Another Chinese scholar, Wang Yiwei (2016) by contrast appears to be more willing to explicitly state that the BRI *does* have strategic imperatives.

False Equivalence

When Chinese scholars make it a point to say that they are not choosing sides between India and Pakistan and that they recognize India's interests, they also state that they must balance between the two countries and that such balancing is for China a 'tough task'.⁶ They go on to declare that the CPEC is not aimed at India and to say that a weak Pakistan would not be in either China's interest or India's interests.⁷ Further, Chinese interlocutors are at pains to stress that Pakistan too, is a victim of terrorism.⁸ And finally, there is the concluding statement that there is 'no need to focus on old problems but that it needs new thinking and new methods'.⁹

Let us address each of these points in turn. China is free to choose sides, balance or do what it will in the pursuit of its national interests. But contrary to what Chinese analysts try to convey to their Indian counterparts, the record of China-Pakistan relations (for example, see Singh 2007; Unnithan 2014) shows that China has not tried as much to balance India and Pakistan as much as balance *against* India with the help of Pakistan. In other words, China has taken the side of Pakistan. The record here indicates a long and continuing history of military exchanges and support and the supply of nuclear weapons and technology to a Pakistani security establishment that has engaged in at least four conventional conflicts with India and supported separatism, extremism and terrorism in India for several decades. The nuclear weapons, in fact, have only emboldened the Pakistani security establishment to engage in conflict against India largely without fear of repercussions. These facts are often ignored or explained away by the Chinese as happening in a previous era or out of different, even commercial, motivations. This might well be the case, but then Chinese analysts and policymakers do not simultaneously acknowledge why they need to then work harder to win back Indian trust in order to make the BRI work.

Next, balancing India and Pakistan also calls into question China's position on terrorism, as does the argument that Pakistan is also a victim of terrorism. Of course, Pakistan is a victim of terrorism, but the reality which Chinese themselves acknowledge is that this terrorism is a homegrown problem created and cultivated by elements of Pakistan's own security establishment. Terrorism in India, on the other hand, is entirely of external origin and support. India's internal problems that turn violent or extremist - the Naxalism/Maoism problem in central India and

⁶ Chinese scholar (#2) at a conference in Sichuan, 2016.

⁷ Chinese scholar (#1) at a conference in Sichuan, 2016.

⁸ Chinese scholars at a conference in Sichuan, 2016. Also, Chinese scholars at a conference in Beijing, August 2017.

⁹ Chinese scholar (#1) at conference in Sichuan, 2016.

ethnic disaffection in northeastern India - are not classified as 'terrorism' but as 'extremism' or 'insurgencies' for which India uses domestic political means to resolve, including, of course, state violence. But in the case of terrorism which is externally-sponsored, if China keeps trying to sell the idea to New Delhi that it must go on easy on Pakistan because the latter too is a victim, then the conclusion must be that Beijing does not understand or is unwilling to understand the true definition of and concerns about terrorism that India has. Once again, therefore, it would appear that China is taking sides. A distinction must be made clearly and properly between the nature and origins of terrorism affecting India and Pakistan - that is the first step in trying to resolve this problem.

There is by and large in the Indian strategic community, no quarrel with the fact that a weak Pakistan is not in India's interest. However, the Chinese make a mistake if they take this to mean that India can and will do business with anyone in Pakistan no matter what their position on India or in the face of continued provocations. Even when Pakistani army general Pervez Musharraf, who was also responsible for initiating the Kargil conflict in 1999, took over Pakistan later, the Indian government did not hesitate to open negotiations with him over Kashmir and other bilateral difficulties. Even at the present juncture, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi did invite then Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to his swearing-in ceremony in 2014 (*Dawn* 2014) and met him in Pakistan subsequently too (*Al Jazeera* 2015), indicating that Indian governments across party lines have been willing to engage with Pakistan.

However, there are limits to India's tolerance and because India engages with Pakistan does not necessarily mean it also absolves certain elements within the Pakistani security establishment of sponsoring terrorism. This is a reality that Chinese analysts would do well to remind themselves of.

Acknowledging Reality

Chinese interlocutors have a tendency to lecture Indians constantly about their 'old mindsets' and to encourage them to adopt 'new thinking and new methods'. However, this tendency might itself be considered a case of 'old mindsets' *in China*. To ignore the facts that India is a leader on multiple issues of regional and global significance and that Pakistan is not, and cannot be, the only concern in India's external relations, and to believe that India does not acknowledge and understand changing regional and global realities is a case of Chinese condescension. Whatever the gap between India and China today in terms of economic development and other capabilities, if China truly believes in a just, democratic and multipolar world order then, it too, would adjust its thinking and methods of dealing with its neighbours including with India. Chinese analysts should also be more open and willing to engage with Indian analysts on serious questions involving Pakistan.

Naturally, Chinese policymakers and analysts are not unaware of the changing realities around them and if anything are quick learners. There has of late, been a series of Chinese opinion pieces and presentations at conferences¹⁰ that explicitly highlight the India factor. This takes at least two forms, often within the same article or presentation.

The first, in a case of old habits dying hard, harks back to the usual criticism of India for its uncooperative attitude on BRI and statements to the effect that China's cooperation with Pakistan through CPEC would allow 'Pakistan to play a more important role in the economic landscape of South Asia' as a result (Hu 2016b) or that India 'will perhaps end up simply watching China's influence among its neighboring countries rise' (Hu 2016a).¹¹

As a subset, there is also indirect criticism of 'some countries' or 'some big countries' for their attitudes towards BRI (Liu 2016). There is insinuation especially when it comes to the CPEC that India is involved in sabotaging the Sino-Pak venture. One *Global Times* opinion piece referred to 'some hostile overseas forces' in this context. While it held off declaring a link between an attack on a shrine in Balochistan and the opening to business of the Gwadar port in mid-November 2016, it quoted Pakistani officials referring to 'enemies of the country' attempting to 'sabotage' the CPEC in reference to an earlier attack in August in Quetta (Wang W. 2016). It is unlikely that the Pakistani officials in question were not referring to either Afghanistan or India and such quoting, by Chinese media or analysts, of Pakistani statements then has the implication that they agree with the Pakistani assessment. This by extension can also be read as supporting the possible Pakistani allusion to India.

Given this history and context, the second form is possibly even more notable - even though it is too early to say that it forms anything like a trend for the future. Alongside the criticism, there is also increasingly open reference to the need to convince India to join the OBOR. As one op-ed noted, 'India's poor infrastructure is a challenge for Asian nations to become interconnected' (Hu 2016a). While this is an instrumentalist way of looking at India's importance, it is now increasingly openly admitted at seminars and conferences from a political perspective that India is too crucial a link in South Asia for China to ignore - there is an admission that 'India is... one of the four key countries along the Belt and Road' (Liu 2016).

In other words, there is some acknowledgement that not being able to engage India also affects the viability of the BRI. This is no doubt the result of China coming up against several realities in the rest of South Asia including the difficulty

¹⁰ Especially through 2016 and in 2017.

¹¹ Also several Chinese scholars at multiple conferences in China in 2016 and 2017.

of doing business, not least in Pakistan and/or perhaps the difficulty of getting the kind of returns that will keep its enterprises happy.

Economic Incentivizing

The fourth classification of Chinese discourse on BRI vis-à-vis India is of trying to sell BRI to India as a source of stimulus for South Asian regional connectivity and call for ‘complementary projects’ and ‘joint projects’ between India and China in other South Asian countries. It is indeed the case that the Chinese BRI has pushed India to think of different ways of promoting regional connectivity within South Asia albeit within a framework of competition with China rather than cooperation. An example is the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) connectivity project announced by the Modi government (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India 2015). The Indian side clearly realizes that South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is not working given its system of taking decisions only by consensus, something that is elusive given India-Pakistan dynamics.

And so to return to the Chinese suggestion that the BRI will promote South Asian regional connectivity, this then actually undermines both the SAARC system and India’s central role in South Asia and makes China the arbitrator certainly between India and Pakistan, and possibly also for other smaller countries in South Asia in their ties with India. Chinese analysts might well call this an overtly political reading of a suggestion that is economic in nature but the question that they have hitherto refused to answer is if Pakistan’s opposition to India’s initiatives in SAARC were not also political in nature? In this context, to bring the BRI as a so-called ‘stimulus’ or an alternative to indigenous South Asian efforts at cooperation including regional connectivity is actually once again, a case of China taking sides against India.

Chinese scholars have also suggested that the BRI complements Indian Prime Minister Modi’s key ‘Make in India’ initiative of increasing manufacturing in the country, that BRI and ‘Make in India’ could be the foundation for both countries’ economic engagement. There is sound logic here in the sense that growth of manufacturing in India will need Chinese investments in its physical infrastructure as well as in the manufacturing sector itself. However, the record of Chinese investments so far in India has been abysmal. Compared to Xi’s own announcement of US\$20 billion Chinese investments in India over a period of five years made in September 2014 (Indian Council of World Affairs 2014) data reveals that in 2015 and 2016 only some US\$2.4 billion of Chinese investments flowed into India. This, however, masks a positive trend - at the end of 2014 the total Chinese investment in India added up to only US\$2.4 billion, which means that investment flows had doubled in the space of two years (cited in Zhang 2017). What is happening certainly is greater Chinese private equities showing interest and activity in India, but this is largely in the services sector which does not generate as much employment as India requires.

Meanwhile, big money from Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) remains limited, perhaps due to India's stricter regulations as well as difficulties in land acquisition for planned Chinese industrial clusters. Unlike China, land in India is not controlled by the central government but by the state (provincial) governments and seldom available for free because it is privately owned and the subject of negotiations with individual buyers.

Complaints

A related category is also derived from the economic aspect of India-China relations, namely those of complaints by Chinese companies about facing obstacles, including not least those of a 'security' nature in India. Those who stress this aspect, certainly have a point. India's security agencies can be excessively conservative and cautious in their approach to Chinese companies and enterprises in India. Further, India's systems dealing with foreign investment are slow, complicated and confusing. Other problems pointed out by Chinese visitors and observers include those of differing cultures, including work and enterprise cultures, of different management systems and styles, workforce efficiency, and poor logistics and infrastructure. However, to be fair, these are problems that afflict all foreign enterprises and not Chinese ones alone.

That said, there is a particular Chinese way of describing these problems that suggest that these economic issues are also seen and used from a political viewpoint. Take for instance, complaints of differing cultures and management systems. The fact is other East Asians - the Japanese and the South Koreans - are prominently involved in economic activity in India and have been extremely successful too, under the same difficult conditions that Chinese companies are facing. Further, if China has so enthusiastically involved itself in CPEC where cultural issues are similar to those in North India, it cannot be the case that it can be any easier in Pakistan. If anything, the Chinese seem to be deliberately ignoring Indian strengths - especially vis-à-vis Pakistan and many other developing countries that BRI is involved in - in terms of India's strong legal and regulatory frameworks that do not discriminate against foreign companies, as is the case in many countries.

Indian concerns over the nature and ownership of Chinese enterprises remain valid however - as a series of extensive investigations of such entities in many Western countries have proven - and it is up to the Chinese to fix this problem and choose to cooperate with the local laws rather than continue complaining. Similarly, if the Chinese have increasingly imposed stringent conditions on foreign enterprises for operation in China, they cannot complain if other countries do exactly the same as India has proposed it will do (*The Economic Times* 2017).

Conclusion

From about late 2015 when Beijing realized that Indian opposition to BRI remained unchanging, Chinese scholars have frequently stressed that China saw for India a very important role in the BRI in South Asia and tried to assuage Indian concerns.¹² While there might be no doubting the sincerity of such pronouncements by Chinese scholars, there is as yet, little either they or their government can offer by way of specifics. What is more, Indian analysts have also begun to use China's resistance to Indian aspirations for membership to the NSG and the UN Security Council as well as to India's attempts to sanction Pakistan-based terrorists under the UNSC's Resolution 1267 as additional reasons for India to oppose BRI.¹³ While the wisdom of such linkages might be questioned, there is no denying that the BRI is now part of a larger matrix of bilateral problems in the India-China relationship.

Meanwhile, the developments in Sri Lanka and Pakistan in the wake of the BRI have consequences for India and imply similar consequences for other countries where Chinese investments under the BRI framework are going. Even leaving aside the political dimensions, BRI projects will invite greater scrutiny on economic grounds alone - the terms of contracts, the ability to repay debt and the longer-term economic benefits are all, still in the realm of the unknown for many of these projects - and these then will have political consequences. Even if India is officially opposed to the BRI and wants no part in it, it might not be able to insulate itself from the consequences. New Delhi might, therefore, need to simultaneously find a way of dealing with China on the BRI and back the MEA statement of 13 May 2017 (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India 2017) with actions in the form of analytical, technical and legal support for countries that are targets of BRI projects so that they are able to stand up to the Chinese onslaught.

¹² Multiple conferences and meetings in China, 2015-2017. See also Liu (2017).

¹³ Multiple discussions and meetings in India and China, 2016 and 2017.

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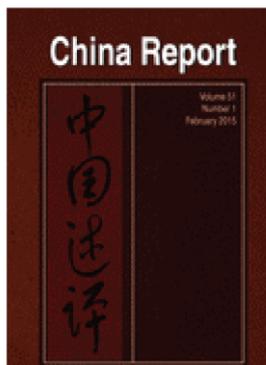


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